



BY SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK

Through the Glasses Darkly

When the hero of John Carpenter's 1988 *They Live* puts on a pair of weird sunglasses that he has stumbled upon in an abandoned church, he notices a billboard that once invited us to a Hawaii beach holiday now simply displays the words:

"MARRY AND REPRODUCE." Ad copy on another billboard—this one for a new color TV—says, "DON'T THINK, CONSUME!"

The glasses, then, function as a device for the critique of ideology. In other words, they enable him to see the real message lying beneath the glossy, colorful surface.

What would we see if we were to observe the Republican presidential campaign through such glasses? The first thing would be a long series of contradictions and inconsistencies:

- Their call to reach across party lines—while waging the cultural war politics of "us" against "them."
- Their warning that the candidates' family life should be off limits—while parading their fami-

lies on stage.

- Their promises of change—while offering the same old programs (lower taxes and less social welfare, a belligerent foreign policy, etc.).
- Their pledge to reduce state spending—while incessantly praising President Reagan. (Recall Reagan's answer to those who worried about the exploding debt: "It is big enough to take care of itself.")
- Their accusations that Democrats privilege style over substance—which they deliver at perfectly staged media events.

The next thing we would see is that these and other inconsistencies are not a weakness, but a source of strength for the Republican message. Republican

strategists masterfully exploit the flaws of liberalism: Its patronizing “concern” for the poor that is combined with a thinly disguised indifference toward—if not outright contempt for—blue-collar workers, and its politically correct feminism that is usually combined with an underlying mistrust of women in power. Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin was a hit on both counts, parading both her working-class husband and her femininity.

The earlier generations of women politicians (Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and even, up to a point, U.S. Sen. Hillary Clinton) were what can be referred to as “phallic” women. They acted as “iron ladies” who imitated and tried to outdo male authority, to be “more men than men themselves.”

Writing in *Le Point*, a French weekly, Jacques-Alain Miller, a follower of the late French philosopher Jacques Lacan, pointed out that Palin, on the contrary, proudly displays her femininity and motherhood. She has a “castrating” effect on her male opponents, not by being more manly than them, but by sarcastically downgrading the puffed-up male authority. According to Miller, Palin instinctively knows that male “phallic” authority is a posture, a semblance to be exploited and mocked. Recall how she mocked Sen. Barack Obama’s work as a community organizer.

Palin provides a “post-feminist” femininity without complexity, uniting the features of mother, prim teacher (glasses, hair in a bun), public figure and, implicitly, sex object, proudly displaying the “first dude” as a phallic toy. The message is that she doesn’t lack anything—and, to add insult to injury, it was a Republican woman who realized this left-liberal dream. It is as if she simply *is* what left-liberal feminists *want* to be. No wonder the Palin effect is one of false liberation: “Drill, baby, drill!” Feminism and family values! Big corporations and blue collars!

So, back to Carpenter’s *They Live*. To get the true Republican message, one should take into account not only what is

said but what is implied.

Where we hear the message of populist frustration over Washington gridlock and corruption, the glasses would show a condoning of the public’s refusal to understand: “We allow you NOT to understand—so have fun, vent your

populist pose.

What if, however, the between-the-lines Republican message (don’t be afraid, there will be no real change) is the true illusion, not the secret truth? What if there really *will* be a change? Or, to paraphrase the Marx brothers: McCain and Palin

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frustration! We will take care of business. We have enough behind-the-scenes experts who can fix things. In a way, it’s better for you not to know.” (Recall Vice President Dick Cheney’s hints at the dark side of power, as he successfully orchestrated an expansion of presidential executive power.)

And where the message is the promise of change, the glasses would show something like this: “Don’t worry, there will be no real change, we just want to change some small things to make sure that nothing will really change.” The rhetoric of change, of troubling Washington’s stagnant waters, is a permanent Republican staple. (Recall former Republican House Speaker Newt Gingrich’s populist anti-Washington rise to power in 1994.)

Let us not be naïve here: Republican voters *know* there will be no real change. They know the same substance will go on with changes in style. This is part of the deal.

Four years ago, Sen. John Kerry lost because he was President Bush with a human face. Today, Sen. John McCain is Bush with a lipsticked face. It’s a rhetorical lipstick of “No bullshit!” When Princeton philosopher Harry Frankfurt, author of the bestselling *On Bullshit*, was asked which U.S. politician breaks out of the predominant bullshitting, he named McCain—and thereby tragi-comically missed a key point. Talking straight, displaying no-bullshit honesty, can be the cleverest form of bullshitting, a mere

look like they want a change and talk like they want a change—but this shouldn’t deceive us, they might very well accomplish a change!

Perhaps this is the true danger, since it would be change in the direction of “Country first!” and of “Drill, baby, drill!”

Luckily, as an electoral blessing in disguise, a sobering thing happened to remind us where we really live: in the reality of global capitalism. The state is planning emergency measures to spend hundreds of billions of dollars—if not \$1 trillion—to repair the consequences of the financial crisis caused by free-market speculations.

The lesson is clear: The market and state are not opposed. Indeed, strong state interventions are needed to keep markets balanced.

The initial Republican reaction to the financial meltdown was a desperate attempt to reduce it to a minor misfortune that could easily be healed by a proper dose of the old Republican medicine (a proper respect for market mechanisms, etc.). In short, the Republicans’ between-the-lines message was this: We allow you to continue to dream.

However, all the political posturing of lower state spending became irrelevant after this sudden brush with the real. Today, even the strongest advocates of diminishing the excessive role of Washington accept the necessity for a state intervention that is sublime in its almost unimaginable quantity. Con-

fronted with this sublime grandeur, all the “no bullshit” bravado was reduced to a confused mumble. Where, today, are McCain’s steely resolve and Palin’s sarcasm?

But was the financial meltdown really the awakening from a dream? It depends on how the meltdown will be perceived by the general public. In other words, which interpretation will win? Which “story” about it will predominate?

When the normal run of things is traumatically interrupted, the field of “discursive” ideological competition opens up. In Germany in the late ’20s, Adolf Hitler won the competition for the narrative that explained to Germans the reasons for the crisis of the Weimar Republic and the way out of it. (His plot was the Jewish plot.) In France in 1940, Marshall Petain’s narrative, that France lost because of the Jewish influence and democratic degeneration, won in explaining the reasons for the French defeat.

Consequently, the main task of the ruling ideology is to impose a narrative that will not put the blame for the meltdown onto the global capitalist system *as such*, but on, say, lax legal regulations and the corruption of big financial institutions. Against this tendency, we should insist on the key question: which “flaw” of the system *as such* opens up the possibility for—and continuous outbreaks of—such crises and collapses?

The first thing to bear in mind is that the origin of the crisis is a “benevolent” one. After the dot-com bubble exploded in the first years of the new millennium, the decision across party lines was to facilitate real estate investments to keep the economy growing and prevent recession. Today’s meltdown is the price paid for the United States avoiding a prolonged recession five years ago.

The danger is that the predominant narrative of the meltdown will be the one that, instead of waking us from a dream, will enable us to *continue to dream*. And it is here that we should start to worry—not only about the economic consequences of the meltdown, but also about the obvious temptation to reinvigorate the “war on terror” and U.S. interventionism in order to keep the economy running. ■



The film *XXY* was slated to be shown at Russia’s first international LGBT film festival, but St. Petersburg officials shut down the festival on opening day.

FILM FESTIVALS

Closeted Russia

By Julie Englander

WHEN IRINA SERGEEVA first ventured outside her native Russia, she was struck by the contrast between gay culture at home and in Western cities like New York.

There aren’t a lot of places for gays in Russia beyond bars and clubs that dot its big cities, she says: “If you don’t want to drink beer or alcohol, there’s nowhere to go.”

For years, Sergeeva, along with Ksenia Zemskaya and Manny de Guerre, tried to think of ways to enrich the lives of gay people in Russia. Finally, in 2007, they decided to organize a film festival—though they had no experience with organizing.

Bok o Bok (or “Side by Side”), Russia’s first international lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) film festival, was scheduled for Oct. 2 to 5 in St. Petersburg. Organizers anticipated 3,000 to 4,000 attendees. But on the morning of Oct. 2, the St. Petersburg fire department—citing code violations—closed the venues where the event was to take place.

The festival logo, a sketch of two smiling stick figures, hugging and sharing a single pair of pants, belies the risk festival organizers took in planning the breakthrough event, to say nothing of the risk many LGBT Russians face on a daily basis.

Although it’s no longer illegal to be gay in Russia—after Article 121 of the Soviet Criminal Code was repealed in 1993—ho-

mophobia is still rampant.

“It’s strange,” says Kevin Moss, editor of the anthology *Out of the Blue: Russia’s Hidden Gay Literature*. “Before, you could almost understand the secrecy, and yet now, even with all the contact Russia has with the West, gay people just aren’t out.”

At least, not publicly.

“We have partners, we pay taxes, we are whole people,” says Zemskaya. “But most gay Russians don’t have a vision of themselves in the future.”

The freedoms that gay Russians began to explore in the ’90s, says Scott Long, director of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Rights Program at Human Rights Watch, all but disappeared under President Vladimir Putin’s regime.

In 2006, riot police thwarted Moscow’s first gay pride parade and, according to news reports, stood by while skinheads and nationalists threw smoke bombs and eggs at LGBT activists.

“Moscow Pride was really important in revealing the depth of hatred and police indifference,” Long says. “But if there’s going to be a real LGBT movement, it has to affect people the other 364 days of the year.”

Moscow mayor Yuri Luzhkov called such rallies “satanic.”

“As long as I am mayor,” Luzhkov declared, “we will not permit these parades to be conducted.”

In 2007, several activists and European members of parliament demonstrated in support of a pride parade. Again, police offered little or no protection against an-